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A ROMAN BOWL FROM BAGDAD

THE bowl described in this article is 4 inches in height, $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter across the top, and is carved from a block of gray marble streaked with black. Except for a piece broken from the lip and now cemented in place the vessel is intact. It was purchased in Damascus and was said to have come from Bagdad. I am publishing it through the courtesy of Professor Butler.

The decoration consists of two busts and a series of figures in low relief, carved on the exterior of the bowl, of such size as



FIGURE 1.—ROMAN BOWL; FRONT.

practically to cover the whole of the surface. These reliefs arrange themselves in three distinct groups and the choice of subjects represented by them seems to have been governed by caprice.

On the front of the bowl are two heads in profile, face to

face. The one at the right is bearded and wears a helmet, with a nondescript animal clambering over it, as a crest. The bust at the left, that of a woman, wears the hair classically arranged over a sphendone. This mode of hairdressing appears on Roman coins bearing the head of Sabina. Since, therefore, this name appears incised in the field between the two heads, it is reasonable to think of this bust as that of Sabina, and the one facing it as that of Hadrian; and, with an elastic imagination, perhaps one may see the likeness. Before leaving these reliefs, it is worth noticing that they are copied directly from busts in the round — probably in marble.

Passing to the right, we encounter the well-known Roman wolf and the twins. In the wolf we have a fairly faithful copy



FIGURE 2.—ROMAN BOWL; WOLF AND TWINS.

of the familiar archaic Roman bronze. Not only are the lips represented with the circular cut at the corner of the mouth as on the bronze, but the band of rough fur which passes over the shoulder behind the foreleg is here suggested by a band of scratches. The modelling of the figure is rather good. In reference to the position of the arms, the twins present some variations from the Renaissance group which is now associated with the wolf. This group is watched by a nude female figure which leans nonchalantly over a rail fence. Whom this figure represents it is hard to say; but an appropriate personage

for this place would be Rhea Silvia. If it is indeed she, then the artist intended that she should be understood to be



FIGURE 3. — ROMAN BOWL; FEMALE FIGURE AND WOLF.

standing in water, for the figure is cut off at the ankles. This amputation, however, is more probably due to the artist having



FIGURE 4. — ROMAN BOWL; WOMAN ON A SWAN.

miscalculated the amount of space necessary for the figure, which, in all probability, fulfils merely a decorative function and has no reference to the mother of the twins.

The third and last group of figures on the bowl seems to be made up of four full-length human figures and their attributes. Next to the wolf is a nude female figure seated unconventionally, with her hands clasped over her knee, on the back of a swan or goose. The creature, to be sure, has a crest; but, in late times evidently, the ancients liked this bird so decorated,¹ for, in the Coptic period, the goose sometimes wears a crest. The female figure riding upon the back of the bird I have ventured to put in the third group, because it is posed with its

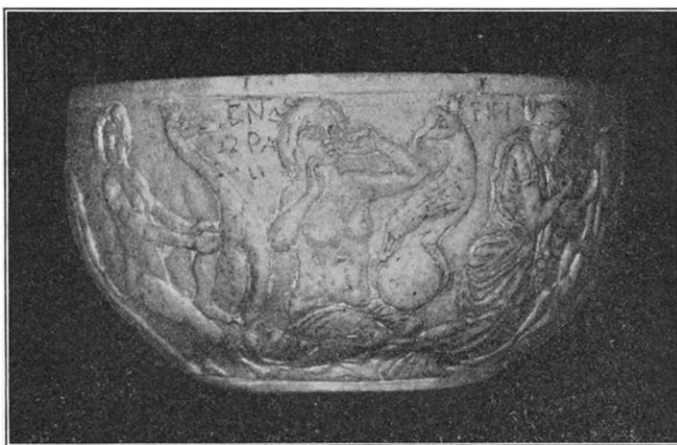


FIGURE 5. — ROMAN BOWL; FEMALE FIGURE AND BIRD.

back to the wolf. The type is unusual, although a parallel is found in a Hellenistic relief of a half-draped woman riding a swan. The latter figure, however, is considerably earlier than the figure on the bowl. The combination of the nude female form and the swan, if it is that bird, might suggest Leda or even, perhaps, Aphrodite, were it not that an inscription behind the figure tells us that it represents Atalanta.

Just in front of the swan sits a half-draped woman with hands raised in what seems to be a gesture of surprise, while a bird rests on a sphere on her knee. The bird I take to be an eagle; for it closely resembles the imperial eagle found on Roman monuments.² But even if we are right in the interpre-

¹ Gayet, *L'Arte Copte*, p. 112.

² Reinach, *Rép.* II, p. 768, 5; Cohen, V, pl. III, 15.

tation of the meaning of the bird, we are little nearer to an understanding of the meaning of the figure on whose knees it is posed. By a very broad stretch of the imagination we might think that the maker of the bowl chose to use the Roman emblem to represent the cuckoo, with the intention of making the female figure stand for a likeness of Hera. But even this desperate hazard comes to naught when we read the name Pandora inscribed near the figure.

The next two figures are easy to identify. Asclepius sits at ease watching the serpent coiling about his staff and feeding



FIGURE 6.—ROMAN BOWL; ASCLEPIUS AND HYGIEIA.

from a patera held by Hygieia. The types in themselves are plain enough; but we are helped in our identification by the inscriptions near them.

With Asclepius we complete the circuit of the exterior. For the most part, the figures seem to defy interpretation; in those of Asclepius and Hygieia perhaps there is a reference to medicine, and, more particularly, that of a magical sort if I am correct in my interpretation of certain of the inscriptions on the bowl. On the other hand, no especial meaning may have resided in the mind of the maker, for there are indications, as we have seen, that the reliefs, in some instances at least, are pastiches of other works of art.

Stylistically the bowl, on the whole, presents a barbaric

appearance. So crude indeed is it that to assume it to be genuine one must come down toward Coptic times to find parallels. But if we are willing to do that, then we shall find works that resemble it. At that time, of course, the non-classic character of the carving in nowise militates against the authenticity of the work. At that time, moreover, the apparent lack of connection between the figures and the inscriptions might be explained on the ground of the bowl having been used for magical purposes.

The inscriptions are not the least interesting part of the bowl. Let us start with those

between the two busts. So far as I can make out, this one, like the others, reads from left to right. It runs as follows:

ΣΒΥΓ | ΜΩ | Ξ.Ξ | ΑΩ | ΥΡ | Ξ. | ΣΑΒΥΝ | Α.ΑΩΚΞ | ⊕ Α

The first word, Sbigmos, is more or less unintelligible. It has, however, a magic sound, and this, with other features in the inscription, led Professor Prentice and myself to look for concealed meanings in the inscription. Indeed, one is ready to look for magical formulae in almost any blind combination of letters after reading such as the following, which were used in a post-Hadrianic magical papyrus from Egypt:¹

ἰωερβηθηθ · ἰωπακερβηθ, ἰωβολχοσηθ · οεντυφω · ασβαραβω · β.εαιση · μενερω · μαραμω · ταυηρ · χθευθωνιε, etc., or αρνεβουατ βολλοχ · βαρβαριχ · ββααλα.²

Out of this word Sbigmos, however, it would seem possible to extract a meaning if we could transliterate the β into φ.

¹ Wessely, *Griechische Zauberpapyrus von Paris und London*, in the *Denkschriften der Wiener Akad. Phil.-Hist. Classe*, 1888. *Zweite Abth.* p. 39.

² *Neue J. B., Suppl. Band*, XVI, p. 762, *Papyrus Magica Musei Lugdonensis*.

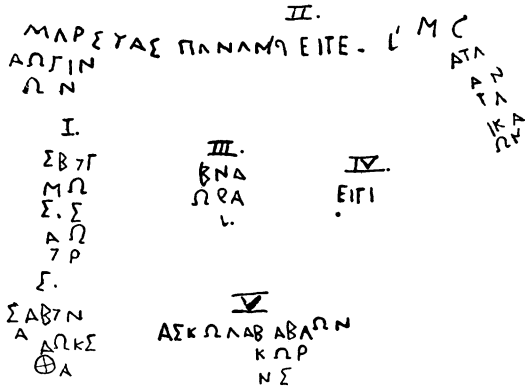


FIGURE 7. — ROMAN BOWL; INSCRIPTIONS.

Then we get the word *σφιγμός*, which is equivalent to *σφίγξις*, which in turn means a constriction. On the other hand, by substituting *υ* for *ι* we get another word, *σφυγμός*, which means a throbbing or pulsation. The two therefore would have a medicinal connotation. But an Arab, and there are reasons for believing the inscriptions may have been written by an Arab, would have used an F for the *φ* sound. The next word, *Σαωιρς*, seems possible of explanation if we transliterate it as *Σε-ου-η-ρος*. The following word is clearly Sabina. Then comes a combination of letters which if anything seemed magical to Professor Prentice and myself. The alpha and omega instantly recalled the regulation abbreviation for the Divinity, while the kappa sigma easily expanded into Kurios. The next letter, which looks like a cross-barred theta, of course has no right to be here if it is that letter. But this form occurs in Christian inscriptions apparently as a punctuation mark,¹ as well as the symbol for God. Alpha might stand either for Adam, who appears in the magical papyri in the cosmogonic sense to concentrate the natural forces evoked,² or for Abraham,³ whose name also is used in invocations. So out of *ΑΩΚΞΘΑ* we could get the formula Alpha omega, Kurios, Theos, Adam or Abraham. To us that might not mean much; but for a late Greek or Roman who believed in the potency of mystic names this formula would be a very powerful one. This inscription gives some idea of how blind the meaning of the writing on the bowl is and at the same time how tantalizingly it seems to hold out a clue for the interpretation of its significance.

The next inscription (as we pass to the right) is the one found over the wolf. Here we have the following combination of letters:

ΜΑΡΞΥΑΣΞ. | ΑΩΓΙΝ|ΥΩΝ | ΠΑΝΑΜΘ · ΕΙΤΕ-Λ'.Μ.Σ.
ΑΤΑ | ΑΝ | Τ.Α | ΙΚΑ | ΩΝ |

The first word, Marsyas, is easily read, but the connection of this name with the nude figure defies explanation. The word underneath, Aoginion, apparently a genitive plural, likewise has

¹ *Dict. Archéologique Chrétienne*, III, p. 1841.

² Dar. and Saglio, *Magica*, p. 1514.

³ *Neue J. B.*, l.c. p. 818 and *Abh. d. K. Akad. d. W.* Berlin, 1865, p. 219.

no meaning so far as I can make out. It is worth noticing that two forms of iota are employed in the two words.

The next series of letters, namely, Panam and the letter which looks like a rho written retrograde, yields a meaning, such as it is, for Panam could easily be taken for an abbreviation for the Macedonian month-name, Panamos. Moreover, this interpretation would seem to be reënforced by the last letter, if it is correct to assume it to be the numeral six.¹ This numeral in Alexandrine times sometimes takes a shape somewhat resembling our number seven with the left end of the top curled over to the right, and later on—which is of interest here—assumes a shape like a rho written retrograde. This latter form, to be sure, is also the Herodianic numeral for ninety (Roberts and Gardner, *Greek Epigraphy*, p. 475). But if the translation of the preceding letters as Panamos is right, it apparently cannot have that value here.

With the day of the month determined, it is natural to look for the year to follow. What we find as a fact are the letters EITE, which, while they make sense if translated as the conjunction, do not help much in view of what immediately follows. Nor are we better off by supposing that the person who wrote the inscription confused his vowel sounds, as we shall see that he did elsewhere, and so intended these letters to spell the dative of *ἔτος*, the word for year. We are no better off, I say, for the next symbol, which looks like the Roman L with an accent, seems to be the one employed to signify year. Such a form appears on the sign for year on coins and in inscriptions and papyri down into Ptolemaic times.² It is possible that in the word *eite* and the following sign we have an instance of a repetition of the same idea. However that may be, the next two letters, namely, M and what looks like a lunate sigma, can be read as a numeral, 240. Thus, perhaps without too much exercise of the imagination, we get “The sixth of Panamos in the year 240.” But what relation this date bears to the bowl I do not venture to say. In fact, it seems only the more confusing when it is seen that seemingly with this inscription go the words Atalanta and Lykaon. The form, to be sure, in which they appear is Atlant. and Likaon (the *o* being the

¹ Blass in von Mueller's *Handbuch*, I, p. 282.

² Pauly-Wiss. II, p. 613.

omega); but abbreviation and substitution of vowels are not uncommon on this bowl, so that the translation is warranted. It is, in fact, the association of two such names as these — for Lykaon was Atalanta's grandfather — that makes one think that the writer could correlate his ideas when he wished, and that where the meaning is obscured it is because we have not the key to unlock the door. However, if these two words do bear a relation one to the other, so far as can be made out they do not appropriately belong on a date any more than the first two words, Marsyas and Aoginion. The inscription, then, as I have tried to make it out, is *Marsyas Aoginion, Panamos 6th, in the year 240; Atalanta Lykaon*, — not a very hopeful combination of letters, one must admit. The next word, spelled Bndora, is obviously meant for Pandora; and here we get a glimpse of the personality of the perpetrator of the inscriptions, for the method of transliterating here, as elsewhere on the bowl, suggests that we have to deal with an Arab. The name itself helps us in no wise to understand the purpose of the bowl and hardly suits the half-draped female figure near by. Nor are we any nearer to a solution by taking into consideration the sign below, which, from the fact that it is preceded and followed by a mark of punctuation, is evidently meant to be taken by itself. The resemblance which it bears to the archaic Attic lambda is, of course, fortuitous; on the other hand, its similarity to the late sign which stands for "an," while not contributing to the meaning of the word above, at least is possible.

The last inscription but one is made up of the letters ΕΙΓΕ, which, in connection with the adjacent figure, can be easily understood to be a phonetic spelling for the first two syllables of the name Hygieia.

Finally we come to the last inscription on the bowl. This reads ΑΞΚΩΛΑΒ. ΑΒΛΩΝ. | ΚΩΡ | ΝΞ. Here again we encounter a group of words which, taken together, yield a meaning. Transliterating and supplying the omitted vowels, we have three names: Asculapius, Apollo, and Koronis. The combination, as in the case of the names Atalanta and Lykaon, shows that the person responsible for the inscriptions could, when he wished, be intelligible, and leads one to suspect that when he was unintelligible he was so intentionally.

In connection with the relation of the inscriptions to the figures, the question arises whether the same person made them as made the bowl. It is possible that the one responsible for the writing was not familiar with all the subjects represented, and had to draw upon his imagination or chose to add names which had an especial potency in a magical way. One is tempted, in the face of the seeming lack of meaning in the writing on the bowl, to say that the inscription and, in fact, the whole bowl is modern.

So curious indeed is the selection of figures, and so unusual is the character of the technique, that there would seem much reason for relegating the work to the category of forgeries. This impulse, furthermore, is helped on by the fact that the discoloration of the surface which the object possessed when acquired and which contributed so much to its appearance of age, easily disappeared when washed with alcohol, while water much less easily attacked it. The impression of forgery was driven home even more by the additional fact that the inscriptions, when washed, seemed as if recently cut.

The first impression then of the bowl was such as to cause one to be suspicious of it. It is, however, possible to account for these phenomena. In the first place, if the bowl had come fresh from the ground we should expect the ordinary discoloration of the surface, if due to dirt, to disappear when washed with water. If, however, the bowl had been above ground any length of time and had passed through many hands, especially if they were at all greasy, it is not probable that the discoloration would yield so easily to water. On the other hand, it is very probable that it would respond to alcohol. In this connection it is worth noticing that the interior (which was not exposed to handling) was cleansed with water.

The fact that the inscriptions and the other cuttings on the bowl present a new appearance is not a serious argument for forgery, as might be imagined. In the first place, Professor Butler has informed me that the inscription which he discovered last spring in the Lydian tomb at Sardis, when washed with water, had such a fresh look that he felt almost embarrassed to show it to any one as an ancient cutting in the stone. In the second place, I am told by a competent geologist that there is

no reason why a cutting in a marble as good as that of this bowl should not remain fresh indefinitely if properly protected; in fact, that age alone need not be considered as a factor.

More serious difficulties seem presented by the forms of some of the letters in the inscriptions, and by the apparent lack of meaning in the groups of letters and words in these inscriptions. For instance, one does not usually expect to see the four-barred sigma and the uncial omega in inscriptions of the apparent date of this bowl, which, if certain evidence offered by it is correct, belongs in the second or third century A.D. It is well known, however, that the time of Hadrian is one of revival in epigraphy, so that, at that time, it is not impossible to find early forms in the inscriptions. These forms of sigma and omega in fact persist for a much longer time, for they are found, *e.g.*, in an Egyptian inscription¹ dating in the year 232 A.D.

The grounds, therefore, which would seem to mark this bowl as a forgery appear to be insufficient to allow me to condemn it. To be sure, the meaning of the inscriptions on it and the import of the figures are unexplained; but the presence of Asclepius and Hygieia hint at an association with medicine. Possibly the bust of Sabina might also suggest that, for it is thought that the empress in the guise of Hygieia may be represented on a coin in the British Museum.² Furthermore, as we have seen, there seems to be a suggestion of magic in the formulae written on the bowl, and inasmuch as this is intimately connected with the practice of medicine, we have, so it would appear, some reason for thinking that the bowl was used for medicinal purposes, perhaps for grinding herbs and what not. At all events, it is interesting to note that the interior shows much more evidence of scoriation in the lower part than near the edge, where one would not be likely to rub with a pestle.

OLIVER S. TONKS.

VASSAR COLLEGE.

NOTE. — The following communication from Mr. L. Vincent, of the French School in Jerusalem, has been sent me by Professor Bates: "Si la pièce acquise par M. Tonks était encore à Damas

¹ *C.I.G.* 4705.

² *J.H.S.* 1884, p. 93.

en mars-avril 1910 je suis même enclin à croire que c'est le même vase qui a été examiné alors par un de mes confrères, le P. Janssen. Seulement, à cette date le vase en question était indiqué comme provenant de la région méridionale du Ḥauran et le P. Janssen a même quelque soupçon qu'elle proviendrait en réalité d'Arabie, — ce qui ne serait pas pour en diminuer l'intérêt."